

## ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FACT SHEET

An organic site is any field or farm parcel from which harvested crops are intended to be marketed as organic or transitional. USDA organic regulations require that farmers maintain the organic integrity of their sites by minimizing the risk of contamination by prohibited substances outside site boundaries.

Organic sites must have distinct, defined boundaries and buffer zones such as runoff diversions to prevent the unintended application of a prohibited substance to the crop or contact with a prohibited substance applied to adjoining land that is not under organic management. **7CFR §205.202**

### What is a buffer?

A buffer is an area located between a certified organic crop and activities on adjacent land that pose a risk of contamination. Growers establish a buffer when applying to bring new land into certification. The size of your buffer will vary depending on your site's risk of contamination. Your buffer must be sufficient in size or other features (e.g., windbreaks or a diversion ditch) to prevent the possibility of unintended contact by prohibited substances.

A buffer may be an area outside your site managed with native plantings or non-harvested vegetation. A buffer may also be an area inside your site. If you produce crops within that buffer area, they must be diverted to the conventional market.

If all adjacent land is managed organically, and no runoff or other contamination is of concern, a buffer may not be necessary for your site.

Additionally, if adjoining land use or conditions change, an adjustment of buffers may be required.

Factors influencing buffer requirements	Increases Risk	Decreases Risk
Prevailing wind moves towards organic site from conventional land	✓	
Prohibited materials applied with an air blast sprayer or aerial applicator	✓	
Adjacent conventional field is higher in elevation than the organic site	✓	
Adjoining area is unmanaged lawn, pasture, field, or other natural land		✓
Only approved materials used on adjacent land		✓
Adjacent prohibited materials applied with low risk equipment		✓

**Ultimately, it is the grower's responsibility to ensure the organic integrity of a crop is not jeopardized.**

### **Evaluating buffers at inspection**

As part of your annual inspection, your organic sites will be inspected to confirm established buffer management practices. This may include:

1. Verifying buffer management activities that have occurred since the last annual inspection through observations and verification of records.
2. Confirming boundaries, buffers, and adjoining land use information on file matches observations made and client input received at inspection.
3. Confirming buffers are adequate to prevent unintended contact with a prohibited material.
4. Providing technical assistance to help explain buffer requirements
5. Sampling certified product nearest to the source of contamination.

Keeping consistent and clear records (such as land management agreements, roadside management agreements, and buffer harvest records) related to the management of your buffers. This will allow your inspector to review practices that may not be observable in the field.

### **Collecting samples**

Sampling is a tool used by WSDA Organic Program to test the effectiveness of an established buffer. Samples are taken based on risk and at the discretion of the inspector. If a sample comes back positive for a prohibited material, the growers' buffer plan will need to be readdressed.

When residue testing detects a prohibited substance at a level greater than 5 percent of the Environmental Protection Agency's tolerance for that specific residue, the agricultural product can not be sold, labeled, or represented as organic or transitional.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **What are Buffer Zones and Why Does My Farm Need Them?**

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/6%20Buffer%20Zones%20FINAL%20RGK%20V2.pdf>

#### **NOP Guide for Organic Crop Producers**

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/GuideForOrganicCropProducers.pdf>



WSDA Organic Program  
PO Box 42560 | Olympia WA 98504-2560  
(360) 902-1805 | [organic@agr.wa.gov](mailto:organic@agr.wa.gov)  
<http://agr.wa.gov/organic>